

# **The Beginner's Guide to Hiking in Ecuador**

Kindle Edition 2016



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Published by Ryan Mallett-Outtrim and Dissent Sans Frontieres

<http://dissentsansfrontieres.com>



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## **Introduction**

Ecuador is a feast for hikers and climbers. So much so, it can be a little overwhelming on first arrival. After I remembered the difficulty I had picking what to tackle first when I first arrived in Ecuador, in mid 2015 I put together a shortlist of a few of my favourite hikes, listed from easiest to most challenging. All but the most challenging of those hikes could be done without a guide, and plenty of trailheads were accessible by public transport.

Now, it's been more than six months in the making, but at last I've produced an updated list. Since I put together the original guide, I've been busy exploring some of the best trails in Ecuador, and finally feel I have a solid list of great trips, most of which can be done without organised tours. The new and improved guide includes a range of easy and difficult, long and short, and well known and obscure trails from across the Ecuadorian Andes. All the original hikes have also been included, with some new details added. Plus, I've put together an even more detailed list of general tips for exploring the Andes.

Like the original guide, this is far from a comprehensive list of the best Ecuador has to offer. Indeed, some of the country's most exciting climbs like El Altar and Cayambe, and the best treks are still absent. However, these are the places I've personally visited, and feel comfortable recommending.

This latest edition for Kindle includes a few minor edits to the final web version. Along with the slight text changes, I've reformatted the document to be as easy to read as possible on Kindle. This includes removal of photos. I hope this Kindle version proves to be helpful for anyone looking to get started on their Ecuadorian adventures.

Best of luck!

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## Easy

### **Parque Metropolitano**

This well-forested park in the north east of Quito is an easy spot to stretch your legs, in a seemingly endless network of comfortable walking/biking trails. On weekends it's packed with families having barbecues, and there's often a few herds of llamas and alpacas around. The park is easiest to reach by catching the Ecovia to somewhere around Carolina park and walking 20 minutes or so east. Refer to the city maps handed out by the tourist office near Plaza Grande and in most hostels.

### **Parque Itchimbia**

Closer to Quito's colonial center than Parque Metropolitano is Parque Itchimbia, which offers a pleasant stroll with sweeping views of the city. It's much smaller than the larger Parque Metropolitano, but somewhat more conveniently located.

### **Chaquinan and Los Algarrobos**

The Ruta Chaquinan is another walk appropriate for almost anyone. Starting two blocks from Cumbaya's parque central (look for the big arched entrance), the path winds through suburbs and parklands. The trail is flat and easy to follow, and is popular among local joggers and cyclists. About half an hour from the entrance you'll find Los Algarrobos ecological park. This peaceful, well manicured park is free to enter, and includes a maze of forest trails that should keep you occupied for the better part of an hour. All up, Chaquinan and Los Algarrobos can be done as either a half or full day trip from Quito.

Buses depart to Cumbaya from both Quito's northern Rio Coca terminal and at a rank near Jose Navarro and Ladron De Guevara in La Floresta (look for the small, green buses). The trip shouldn't take more than 45 minutes, and the buses will drop you near a handful of shopping malls just outside Cumbaya proper. From there, walk follow the main highway downhill past the massive intersection. To your left you should immediately see a quieter road running parallel to the highway. Follow this road to the end, turn left, then take the first right. The Chaquinan entrance should be on your left.

### **Pululahua**

A crater full of cows isn't something you see everyday. Pululahua is one of the largest craters in South America, and also happens to be inhabited by a small farming community. There are a few good walks around the rim and through the farms inside the crater, making Pululahua a decent half-day option. It could be combined with a visit to Mitad del Mundo.

Getting to the crater is easy. Just take a bus from Quito's Ofelia bus station in the north to the town of Calacali (just next to the Mitad del Mundo buses). Ask the driver to let you off near the entrance to the park. The entrance is off the highway on a road heading vaguely north from where the driver will drop you off. It's about a fifteen minute walk. Coming back, just wait on the main road for a bus to pass. You don't need a tour, as the crater is easy to stroll around alone. The farmers all seemed friendly and extremely polite, though their dogs are a bit aggressive. If you don't like playing rabies roulette, keep a solid stick handy.

### **Papallacta**

The tiny village of Papallacta (accessible from the Rio Coca bus terminal in Quito), is mostly known for its thermal springs, but there are also a few good walks in the area, including around the nearby Laguna Papallacta. There are regular buses to the village from Quito's Rio Coca station.

### **Lago San Pablo and Surroundings**

The countryside outside the city of Otavalo is absolutely overflowing with opportunities for adventure. A great place to start is San Pablo lake, just 20 minutes outside the city. The area around the lake is speckled with petite farming villages, where the pace of life slows to a crawl. There are plenty of dirt paths winding between villages to easily keep any visitor occupied for days, with regular buses back to Otavalo until late afternoon. A few highlights include the aquatic park outside the village of San Pablo, and the Indigenous village of Peguche. From Peguche, there is a short walk to a waterfall popular among locals. To get to any villages around San Pablo, look for departing buses at Otavalo's terminal terrestre, or the small bus stop across the road.

## **Moderate**

### **Cubilche**

The village of La Esperanza near Ibarra is best known as the drop off point for a serious hike to the Imbabura crater. However, if you're not keen on tackling the challenging crater hike, an easier option is the walk to the Lagunas Cubilche, a handful of strikingly round natural ponds just outside the village. It's an easy walk, and Emerson at the Refugio Terra Esperanza can tell you the way. Getting to La Esperanza is easy from Quito. Catch a bus from Carcelen terminal to Ibarra, then a taxi (US\$5) to the nearby village of La Esperanza.

### **Cuicocha**

Known as the "Guinea Pig Lake", Cuicocha is about 30 minutes from Otavalo or the nearby leather-working village of Cotacachi, and is another chilled out half-day affair. The lake can be circumnavigated in about five hours, but don't expect things to be too easy. The trail mostly follows the ridge of the gaping crater nestling Cuicocha. It's moderately steep at times, and the weather here changes quickly. Rain showers can come out of nowhere, and the wind can be intense while straddling some of the more exposed ridges. Stay clear of the edge of the cliffs facing the lake. The soil is loose, and it's a long way down to the waterline.

Cuicocha can be reached from Otavalo or the village of Cotacachi. From the latter, a cab should cost around \$5 each way. If you want to make the hike a bit easier, ask the driver to drop you at the top. However, before you hit the trail, grab the driver's phone number and give them a call when you're almost finished. As far as I'm aware, there's no public transport out here.

The relatively high cost of reaching Cuicocha may be off-putting for some, but I'd suggest not giving this place a miss. It's a good, varied walk, and the views of the surrounding countryside are stunning.

### **Antisanilla**

Hiking across the old lava flows of Antisanilla is a little other worldly. The dry lava has created fields of jagged rock that cut through the otherwise verdant landscape. Unfortunately, getting here without private transport is a little tough. It might be possible to get some kind of transport from Pintag, or you may have to resort to hiring a guide.

### **Ilalo**

Another trailhead reachable within an hour from Quito, Ilalo is a good warm up for getting acclimatized in preparation for tougher hikes. The hike itself is a gentle, 2-3 hour affair starting from El Tingo. To get to the El Tingo trailhead from Quito, take a green bus from the long distance bus station just south of La Marin trolley bus station. It's about a five minute walk downhill, following the main road. El Tingo buses are at the far end. The bus should drop you off near the Hostal Margarita in El Tingo. Head towards the main square, about 2-3 blocks from the hostel. The trailhead is just next to the church on the square.

### **Quilotoa**

Arguably the most visually stunning moderate level hike listed here, Quilotoa is a lovely volcanic lake very similar to Cuicocha, though it's little further afield. The lake can be reached from Latacunga (a few hours south of Quito), and can be done as a single extremely long day from Quito, or as a weekend trip. There's a few decent places to stay in the extremely touristy village near the lake. Camping on the shore is possible, but probably not that peaceful on weekends.

## **Laguna Mojanda/Fuya Fuya**

Fuya Fuya is the name given to a low peak near Laguna Mojanda, a pretty lake that can be reached from Otavalo by cab (45 minutes, US\$10 each way). The climb itself is pretty short, but there are a few other trails in the area to keep more intrepid spirits occupied. Camping at the lake is possible.

## **Yanurco**

An alternative to Fuya Fuya is Yanurco, a peak on the opposite side of Laguna Mojanda. The peak is best known for its interestingly shaped rectangular outcropping, referred to by locals as el Monolito (the Monolith). Climbing up el Monolito offers a fun photo opportunity, while the rest of the hike is a pleasant ascent overlooking the lake.

## **Coturco**

Somewhat more obscure than most of the other hikes so far, Coturco isn't as well trodden my other moderate level options. Nonetheless, this half day walk is well marked, and it'd be impossible to get lost. The track begins just outside the village of Pifo (around 45 minutes by bus from the Rio Coca terminal), and winds through verdant farmlands to a stubby hill with some decent views. It's easy enough to get a cab from Pifo to the trailhead (just ask to be dropped off at the acueducto and follow the steps down, before hitting the trail on the other side of the valley), but if you get lost just ask one of the many chilled out country bumpkins you'll probably run into on the trail.

## **Nono**

The tiny village of Nono is less than an hour from Quito, but lives in a secluded world of its own. It's also the starting point for a collection of relatively easy yet rewarding hikes. Two of the simplest hikes start at the main intersection near the entrance of the village. Follow the signs pointing to the cascadas, and you'll be led down a quiet dirt road that winds through dairy farms and pine forests. Eventually you'll reach a fork – the left road goes to a closer set of waterfalls (less than an hour away, US\$2.50 entrance fee, very well marked though distances are a little off), while the right turn takes you on a 14 kilometer hike to another set of waterfalls further away. Both roads have almost no traffic, though the longer hike has one turn that's easy to miss. Basically, if you turn right at the first fork out of Nono, follow the road for about 2 hours as it snakes through the hills. About 10 minutes after passing a large house with advertisements for the cascada, keep an eye out for a small gate to your right, leading into the bush. The gate is marked by some subtle red paint on a nearby sign post. From the gate, follow an off-road trail for 40 minutes downhill, keeping an eye out for the occasional red arrow. You may have to pay a few dollars to enter if the landowner is around.

Nono itself can be reached by taking a bus that waits on a random corner in the Cotocollao neighborhood in northern Quito. The easiest way to reach this slightly obscure bus stop is to take the Ecovia to the La Ofelia bus terminal, then pay US\$1.50 for a cab, and ask for the bus stop to Nono in Cotocollao. There are regular buses between Cotocollao and Nono from around 0700 to 1700, with more on weekends. Nono itself is absolutely lovely, but has minimal services. On weekends a handful of posadas and restaurants open, but during the week the village has very little to offer visitors. While the hikes listed above can be easily done as day trips from Quito, if you need a place to sleep outside of weekends, you can ask around for Villa Doris, a very expensive but comfortable posada run by an friendly couple just outside the village.

## **Pahuma Reserve**

Located just over an hour outside Quito, Pahuma is a brilliant pick for either a weekend getaway from the capital, or as a rewarding pit stop on the trip to Mindo. This humble cloud forest reserve is just off the main highway that passes between Quito and Mindo, and has a great collection of hikes ranging from half day strolls to a longer, overnight trip. All the hikes start from the "Nature Center," a timber cabin a few hundred meters from the highway. It's possible to stay overnight at the cabin for around US\$20, though don't expect any amenities beyond a bed. There's also second, even more



basic cabin half way to the peak (also no water), with a fire pit and plenty of space for a few tents. The second cabin can be reached within a few hours from the first. After the second cabin, it's possible to follow the trail for another hour to Pahuma Peak, which is little more than a vague clearing in the cloud forest. Bring a machete, as the trail isn't well maintained at this point. Beyond the peak, the trail slowly becomes fainter and fainter, until it's barely visible. Apparently, the trail can be followed all the way to Mindo, but you'll probably need a guide to go that far. Whichever trail you choose, be sure to speak with the park guardians at the restaurant near the highway before setting off.

To get to Pahuma, take a bus from Quito's Ofelia station heading to either Mindo or Nanegal. The main issue is ensuring the driver has some idea where to drop you off. The stop itself is about 25 minutes out from the village of Calicali (the first village you'll see after passing Mitad del Mundo). Look out for the Pahuma sign on the right hand side of the road. If you're worried about missing the stop, you can always ask the driver to drop you at Calicali, and get a taxi the rest of the way (expect to pay US\$5 to US\$10). More details can be found at the park website, <http://www.ceiba.org/elpahuma.htm>.

### **Pasochoa**

Pasochoa is a great hike just on the edge of Quito. It makes for a solid day hike, but there are also options for camping. This reserve offers some pretty sweet views of the capital, and a trail long and steep enough to feel like a solid achievement, without being too tough.

Getting to Pasochoa is a simple matter of catching an Amaguaña bound bus from Quito's Marin station. Ask the driver to let you off at Pasochoa, and they should drop you on the side of the highway about 45 minutes out of the city. From there, either hire a truck to take you to the reserve, or walk about an hour, following the road to the right of the chapel near the highway. It's easy: just get off the bus, look for the chapel, then look for the sign, and follow the path as it weaves between dairy farms. You'll be surprised just how rural the road to Pasochoa is, given how close you are to the city. Try not to trip over any chickens.

The trail inside the park is a rapid 1 hour ascent through humid forest, followed by around 4 hours to the summit along a ridge with great views on both sides

### **Rucu Pichincha**

The final moderate level hike is also the first trip on this list with some serious altitude. At just under 4800, Rucu towers over Quito, tempting recent arrivals with its jagged volcanic peak. Great views and a finger-licking good ascent make Rucu an excellent day out from the city. To get to the peak, head to the TeleferiQo cable car (a 30 minute walk north-west of the Colon Trolley bus station, or a 10 minute cab ride from the old town).

Don't panic if you read in your guidebook that the lines are endless. Head out early on a weekday and the place will be empty.

After a smooth five minute ascent in the cable car, you'll disembark at the trail head. The trail is very easy to follow, as it gently winds through rolling, grassy hills. Just keep heading towards the north flank of the peak.

An alternative to Rucu is another of Pichincha's peaks, Guagua is slightly more challenging, and can be reached by pickup truck from the outlying village of Lloa.

## **Serious Business**

### **El Corazon**

A long approach and a somewhat precarious final ascent put Corazon in a league above Rucu and its ilk. This oft-overlooked peak can be done as a day trip from Quito, though you'll have to set out early and expect to return late. A more comfortable option is doing Corazon as an overnight trip from Quito, staying at a hostel just a few hundred meters from the trailhead. Getting to the trail head is a simple matter of grabbing a seat on a Machachi bound bus from Quito's Quitumbe terminal. At the town of Machachi, transfer to a bus heading for the nearby village of Aloasi. Most of the buses will drop you off at Aloasi's main square, but the ones marked "La Moya" go directly past the Machachi train station (which confusingly enough, is located on the outskirts of Aloasi). From Quito, the entire trip to the train station can be done in 2 hours.

The trail to the peak starts about 100 meters north of the train station. The trick is to just walk up the tracks from the boarding platform until you see the big reflective X sign on your left. From the station, you'll spend 2 hours weaving between farms (keep taking the right turns), before hitting the foothills. It's mostly straight forward, except for one bit when IMG\_8519 you leave the road behind and start climbing the foothills. The road takes a sudden right hand turn into muddy oblivion, while to your left there's nothing but farmland. Rather than turn left or right, just head straight through a small dirt path through the undergrowth. The occasional shreds of coloured fabric in the trees appear to serve as trail markers. From there, the rest of the trail is self-evident until the peak.

Climbing the mountain itself is a tricky affair. It's a steep ascent of rough scrambling over jagged volcanic rock. When I hit the peak I had some serious cloud cover and heavy winds. Take it easy, as there are plenty of loose rocks, and it's a long way down. All up, expect the hike to take around around nine hours round trip from the train station, including one hour for the ascent.

While it's hypothetically possible to camp beneath Corazon's peak (though there's no water anywhere on the trail), a more comfortable option is crashing at Hosteria La Estacion (099 277 1578). It's just across the road from the train station, and has stunning views at sunset.

### **Imbabura**

Imbabura sets itself apart from Ecuador's other volcanoes with its low, blown out crater, complete with evocative, primordial-style rock formations. Well worth your time.

Getting there is easy from Quito. Catch a bus from Carcelen terminal to Ibarra, then a taxi (US\$5) to the nearby village of La Esperanza. A great place to stay is Refugio Terra Esperanza. The delightfully amiable owner Emerson can arrange a truck to the trailhead (around US\$5 from memory), and can also give you up-to-date directions to the summit. If you don't feel comfortable striking out alone, he and his dog can guide you up for a small fee.

### **Illiniza Norte**

Easily the meatiest hike so far, and definitely the first on this list that most hikers should consider hiring a guide for. The peak can probably be physically done without a guide (assuming you don't cop trouble from park rangers), but having someone who knows the area is worth the cash for this 12 hour marathon. Weather can be unpredictable, and the trail isn't always blatantly obvious.

## **Technical**

### **Sincholagua**

Physically speaking, Sincholagua isn't as demanding as Illiniza Norte. But, reaching the final peak requires a spot of rappelling, making this the first technical climb on the list (well, just). Moreover, Sincholagua isn't easy to reach, and the approach is a fickle meander through foothills. Hence, while you might not break as much of a sweat on Sincholagua as you would on Illiniza Norte, Sincho makes up for it by demanding more brainpower.

Sincholagua gets onto so few hikers' hit lists that if you make it out to this far flung peak it means you're probably well on your way to becoming a veteran of the Ecuadorian wilderness (or so my ego tells me). Apparently, its peak also offers some decent views of Antisana and Cotopaxi during clear weather.

### **Cotopaxi**

Aaaaah Cotopaxi, the stunning snow-capped beauty that tempts you from day one in Ecuador. Cotopaxi's glistening slopes are almost always visible from Quito, and just scream to be climbed. Although you'll require gear (crampons, pick, etc) and a guide, Coto isn't technically strenuous. However, it's certainly not an easy hike, and not for the faint hearted.

### **Antisana**

The approach to I've heard this is a more technical climb than Coto, though I haven't been all the way to the top. This mountain is a good place to practice climbing (which is why I went there), as the glacier begins fairly low. Antisana and its surroundings are apparently also good for condor spotting, though getting near the peak is a bureaucratic nightmare if you don't have a guide.

### **Chimborazo**

The mother of the Ecuadorian Andes, Chimborazo is a hell of a beast to look at, but technically not much more challenging than Coto. It is, however, significantly higher, at 6,268 meters. If you're a scrooge but want to still see the mountain, it's possible to get to the ice without forking out for a guide (a "close enough" option I guess).

Chimborazo can be easily reached from Ecuador's third largest city, Riobamba. Even there, the silent silhouette of the mountain is an imposing sight.

From Riobamba's main bus terminal, just grab a bus heading to the town of Guaranda, and ask the driver to let you off at the Chimborazo entrance. From the entrance on the main road, it's a few hours by foot to the first refuge, and another half hour to the second. Bank enough time to be back at the entrance well before 1800 – when the last bus back to Riobamba passes by.

## **Multi-Day Treks**

### **Quilotoa Loop**

The famous Quilotoa Loop isn't as secluded as it once was, but is still a popular multi-day trek combining bus trips and hikes. My partner and I just did a few days of it a while back, and enjoyed it thoroughly. The full loop takes a week or so, and involves hopping from village to village. Most hostels along the route can provide maps and details of the trail, though the Black Sheep Inn is universally regarded as the best place to get solid information on the trip.

### **Laguna Puruhanta/ Cayambe Coca Ecological Reserve**

The Cayambe Coca Ecological Reserve offers endless opportunities for multi-day treks in isolated wilderness. The only one I've done so far is the trek from the village of Pesillo (near the town of Cayambe, 1.5 hours north-east of Quito) to Laguna Puruhanta. It's a challenging hike through muddy sierra terrain, and is a wonderful way to get totally off the grid. You'll need topographic maps from the Instituto Geográfico Militar in Quito, and a guidebook with trails listed. I'd recommend Viva Travel Guides' Ecuador: Hiking and Climbing Guide, which provides details of a number of great treks in the area, including the Pesillo-Puruhanta trek.

### **Cajas National Park**

Cajas is one of Ecuador's most well known and well trodden national parks – and with good reason. This is some of Ecuador's most stunning wilderness. While it makes for some great day hikes, it's in multi-day treks that Cajas really shines.

Getting to Cajas from the nearby city of Cuenca can be a little baffling for the uninitiated, as for some reason there are a few unusual rumors circulating around the local hostels. Even the guidebooks seem to disagree, despite the fact it's actually very easy to reach the park.

The simplest way to get to Cajas is to take a bus from the Terminal Terrestre in Cuenca's north east. This will almost certainly be the bus terminal you'd have been dropped off at if you arrived in Cuenca by a long distance bus from Quito or Guayaquil. The company "Occidental" has regular buses to Cajas from around 0800 until 1600 most days from this terminal. However, their office is a little difficult to find. Look for the tiny, lime green hole in the wall huddled in a corner at the end of the bus departure bay closest to the food court. It's a bit weird, as you actually have to head out to the area where the buses leave. The Occidental buses themselves leave from the far end of the departure bay. The bit that confuses some travelers (myself included) is that many people around Cuenca advise catching the bus from the Terminal del Sur. This isn't the best idea, as the same bus from the main Terminal Terrestre actually loops around to Terminal del Sur before heading to Cuenca, meaning anyone who lines up at the Terminal del Sur risks not getting a seat. Don't pay attention to other suggestions such as taking a bus from the Mercado bus stop, as the bus from the main Terminal Terrestre is simply the best option. In any case, the trip from Cuenca to the park itself takes between one to two hours, depending on traffic. The bus will drop you off at the Treadadora ranger station, in the north of the park.

For more, read my piece on how to survive Cajas on the website, at <http://dissentsansfrontieres.com/2015/12/02/how-to-tackle-ecuadors-cajas-national-park/>

### **Sangay National Park**

Far less visited than Cajas, sprawling Sangay is one of Ecuador's least trodden, most isolated

national parks. The best place to get a taste of Sangay is Ozogoché, a collection of lakes in the west of the park. The lakes themselves make for great camping, and a solid base for striking out into the unknown wilderness beyond. A good target is the peak of the aptly named el Soroche (the Altitude Sickness), which is a grueling one day hike from the lakes. Bear in mind: the terrain around Sangay is tougher than most routes through Cajas. That means more mud, less obvious trails and more challenging weather. The park itself also isn't so easy to reach. The best way to get to the lakes is either with a tour from Riobamba or Quito, or paying roughly US\$20 to get a pickup truck from the nearby village of Guamote.

## Tips, Tricks and Important Notes

Ecuador is one of the easiest countries to travel I've ever visited. Public transport is generally frequent and on schedule. Outside major cities, the countryside is pretty safe, and the people are polite and helpful. However, I have run into a few issues.

Firstly, if you're bringing a camping stove from home, be warned: it's impossible to get hold of any kind of white fuel: shellite/ naphtha, kerosene etc. Personally, I use an MSR Whisperlite Universal; commonly referred to as the AK-47 of camping stoves due to its versatility and durability. MSR butane canisters can be purchased from Tatoo, and in worst case scenarios, the Universal can run on unleaded petrol. If you don't want to fork out for the MSR, you can always DIY an alcohol stove on the fly.

Next, don't forget to always be prepared for rain! As with any high altitude environment, the weather can change quickly, making even some of the easiest hikes dangerous if you run into serious wind and rain. If things look like they're turning too sketchy, turn back and save the climb for another day. Along with wind and rain, you can expect plenty of mud on the paramo. Gaiters are popular among Ecuadorian hikers, while most campesinos living in the highlands are rarely caught without a solid pair of rubber boots. At the very least, make sure you have some solid, well worn in, waterproof boots. The higher the better.

Another useful travel companion is the previously mentioned Viva Travel Guides' Ecuador: Hiking and Climbing Guide. This is the first time I've actually recommended a travel guide, and I'm doing so because the Viva guide is easily the best resource I've found for hiking in Ecuador. The book details hikes that range from the well-trodden to obscure – some of which I don't think I'd have discovered without it. However, a lot of the information is pretty outdated, so be sure to do your own research before hitting the trail. I'd strongly suggest accompanying the book with topographic maps from the Instituto Geografico Militar, which you can buy for a few dollars each. It's sometimes possible to obtain basic maps at certain national park ranger stations, such as the Toredora entrance to Cajas. Also, regarding national parks: always be aware of regulations. Some parks have permanent fire bans, while others go as far as restricting alcohol. In general, just try not to bother people, and do the right thing. Don't leave garbage behind, and keep your campsite low key. A final resource to consider picking up is the Ñan magazine. This monthly publication is something of a trailblazer when it comes to discovering new and forgotten places to visit across Ecuador. Each copy of the magazine includes both English and Spanish language content. The best place to track it down is Supermaxi/Megamaxi.

Happy hiking!